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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the attitudes of multiple stakeholders toward competencies for public-school leaders in Alabama. It examines the views of various groups in the state's education system--teachers, parents, practitioners, and professors of educational leadership--to determine differences in perceptions regarding the perceived importance of different skill areas. A unique instrument that incorporated the six Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards for educational administrators was developed for the survey. Based on 242 usable responses, the findings suggest that Alabama public-school stakeholders consider ethics as the most important competency for school administrators. School culture was the next important standard, followed by vision, management, collaboration, and political context. Parents' response patterns were most similar to practitioners' opinions. Responses from teachers and selected professors were interesting in that both groups ranked the standards the same in order of importance: school culture, ethics, vision, management, collaboration, and political context. Teachers and parents placed more importance on current technologies that support management functions than did educational leadership professors. The results suggest that participants possess a common understanding of the many roles of public-school leaders, and that all groups should learn more about the skill areas of those who serve as instructional leaders. (Contains 17 references.) (RJM)

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PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR COMPETENCIES: A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS IN ALABAMA

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PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR COMPETENCIES: A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS IN ALABAMA

There has been an increased interest in recent years in the status of public education in the United States. Once again, Americans are questioning the quality of instruction offered in our nation's public school systems (Schlechty, 1993; Wagner, 1998). Public scrutiny of American education has been a recurring feature of American social history in the last half of the twentieth century. This new concern is very similar to events that plagued the education profession in prior decades. For example, during the 1950s, one primary issue was the quality of science and mathematics instruction. The technology gains of other countries brought about an increased emphasis on these subjects in America's schools. The Russian satellite, Sputnik, was the catalyst in this case (Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1988; Schlechty, 1993).

The reform movement of the late 1980s and the 1990s, however, does not solely focus on academic content. The structure and management of our nation's educational systems are now becoming the subject of scrutiny (Meter & Murphy, 1987; Schlechty, 1993; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1996; Thompson, 1996; Wagner, 1998). This implies that administrators, too, are being carefully scrutinized, for they are the ones who must navigate new structures and utilize new management/ leadership skills.

The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes of multiple stakeholders toward educational administrator competencies for public school leaders in Alabama. At issue was the perceived importance of different skill areas. The views of various stakeholder groups in the state's educational system including teachers, parents,

practitioners, and professors of educational leadership, were examined to determine if differences in perceptions exist. In accordance with this purpose, the research was designed to address the following research questions: Are there significant differences in the perceptions of the importance of public school administrators competencies by stakeholders groups in Alabama's public schools? If so, where are they and how great are the differences? This is important since 60% of the state's current superintendents and 40% of all its present principals will be eligible for retirement within the next five years (Kochan & Spencer, 1997).

Methodology

The goal of the research was accomplished by surveying 400 stakeholders in the state. The groups included one hundred practicing administrators, one hundred teachers, one hundred parents, and one hundred professors of educational leadership. Three fourths of the respondents (administrators, teachers, and parents) were randomly selected by the Department of Computer Services at the Alabama State Department of Education. The sample of educational leadership professors included all active members of the Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership and comparable professors from bordering states selected to balance the sample sizes. The survey instrument used in this study was developed by this researcher and incorporated the six Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for educational administrators (Council of Chief State School Officers,1996) and two open-ended questions that allowed for respondent input (See Appendix A). Of the 400 public school stakeholders who were chosen for the sample, 242 provided usable responses on the instrument. The collected data was processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The

independent variables were the different roles of the stakeholders in Alabama's public schools, while the dependent variables were the respondents' rankings of the importance of the public school administrator competencies. The data set containing the survey data on the ISLLC competencies and respective indicators were run using T-tests, Univariate (ANOVA) and multivariate (MANOVA) procedures.

Findings

Collectively, Alabama public school stakeholders selected Standard Five (Ethics) as the most important competency for school administrators. School Culture (Standard Two) was the next important followed by Standards One (Vision), Three (Management), Four (Collaboration), and Six (Political Context). When examined separately, Alabama administrators identified Standard Five (Ethics) as the most important skill for school leaders followed by Standard Three (Management). Standards Two (School Culture), One (Vision), Four (Collaboration), and Six (Political Context) were next in rank order. Parents' response patterns were most similar to the practitioners. Ethics (Standard Five) was identified as the most important skill, while School Culture (Standard Two) was cited as the second requisite skill area for school leaders. The remaining standards in order of their rankings from this group were Standards One (Vision), Three (Management), Four (Collaboration), and Six (Political Context).

Responses from Alabama teachers and the selected educational leadership professors yielded most interesting findings. In terms of the rankings for both of these groups, identical response patterns resulted. School Culture (Standard Two) was identified by both groups as the most important, closely followed by Standard Five (Ethics), Standards One (Vision), Three (Management), Four (Collaboration), and Six

(Political Context) were the remaining competencies listed in rank order by these two groups.

Multivariate tests were performed on the stakeholders' response patterns to the absolute importance of the six ISLLC standards. The results showed that there were significant differences (at the .05 level) among at least two of the Alabama stakeholder groups. This led the researcher to perform Univariate (ANOVA) procedures on each of the standards and their respective indicators. The findings from this subsequent procedure illustrated that the groups differed on ISLLC Standards Three (Management) and Four (Collaboration). Alabama administrators viewed management (ISLLC Standard Three) as a more important skill than did the teachers and educational leadership professors. By comparison, the parents surveyed cited ISLLC Standard Four (Collaboration) as being more of a requisite skill than did the professors of educational leadership.

Univariate procedures were then conducted on the indicators of the ISLLC standards. In the instances where significant differences existed in perceptions of the standards, only those groups of stakeholders were compared. Findings from this procedure suggest that Alabama teachers and parents placed more importance on current technologies that support management functions (ISLLC Standard Three Indicator 3g) than did educational leadership professors. Similarly, on ISLLC Standard Two Indicator 3h (Competency in school facilities and space), administrators, teachers, and parents in the state also placed more emphasis on this skill than the educational leadership professors did. Significant differences were also noted on ISLLC Standard Four Indicator 4e (Competency in developing successful models of school, family, business,

community, government, and higher education partnerships). Parents viewed skill in this area more strongly than did the professors of educational leadership.

On two open-ended questions, participants were also asked to list the areas that they perceived should be the primary focus of educational leadership preparation programs. Teachers identified Communication, Classroom Experience, Interpersonal Skills, Student Learning Styles, Management, and School-Community Relations as focus areas in preparation programs. Parents in the state, by comparison, cited Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Cultural Diversity, School-Community Relations, Ethics, Student Learning Styles, Teacher Instructional Skills, Curriculum Design, and Classroom Experience as the focal points. Practitioners' suggestions included Communication, Fiscal Management, Instructional Leadership, Human Relations, School-Community Relations, Ethics, Staff-Development, More Practical on Field Based Experiences, and Strategic Planning. Finally, educational leadership professors proposed that Team-Building, Instructional Supervision, Communication, Ethics, Defining Leadership versus Management, Human Resources Development, Management, and Developing Vision be the main emphasis points in developmental programs for school leaders. Across all four-stakeholder groups, Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Classroom Experience, Ethics, and Instructional Leadership emerged as the main suggestions for the primary emphasis of preparation programs for educational administrators.

Policy Implications

This exploratory research has multiple implications for all of the stakeholders in Alabama's public schools. Although some of the findings of the study suggest that the participants do have a common understanding of the many roles of public school leaders, all of the groups should continue to learn more about the skill areas of those who serve as the instructional leaders in school settings. For these reasons, the researcher expects to see more of a prevalence of administrator evaluation instruments like the "360 Degree Feedback" (Manatt, 1997; Santeuranio, 1998) in the state. What follows are some of the implications of this research for each group of Alabama stakeholders.

Administrators

As schools and school districts are being held more accountable for their performance than ever before (Hendrie, 1997; Murphy, 1997), Alabama practitioners will have to continue to learn more about their roles and the settings that they are employed. The revised Alabama public school administrator evaluator system includes multiple components on which school leaders will be evaluated (Alabama State Department of Education, 1998). Administrators will now be required to develop portfolios and collect artifacts to further illustrate their competence to the other groups of stakeholders. This holds major implications for practitioners in the state. Leaders in Alabama's schools will have to continue to improve their instructional skills and strive to be current in the trends that impact public education such as: Multiculturalism, Special Education, Instructional Technology, and, more recently, School Safety Issues.

Teachers

To continue the national trend of teachers as leaders, Alabama teachers will have to stay current in the field of educational leadership. An added implication of such a move is that it makes it easier for school district personnel to identify teachers who are ready to make the transition into educational leadership. This is the same premise that officials at the New York City Board of Education operated on when it began its partnership with Bank Street College (Crow, Mecklowitz, & Weekler, 1992). Similarly, one of the good aspects of the Hawaii Study (Marlow, 1996) is that it brought teachers and a principal together during the preparation stage. By doing this, both entities got to learn more about the complexity of the others' job description. Projects of this nature should be developed for prospective teachers and administrators in Alabama.

Parents

The findings of this research illustrate that parents in Alabama will have to at least maintain their current level of involvement in the state's public schools to continue to have an adequate picture of what to expect from their school leaders. More parents in the state should take advantage of the training offered by the Alabama School Boards Association (Sims-de Graffenreid, 1996). If a system like "360 Degree Feedback" (Manatt, 1997; Santeuranio, 1998) is adopted in Alabama, parents should actively participate so that their opinions on the performance of their school leaders can be used. Such endeavors will not only strengthen the relationship between these two groups, but also provide parents with a better knowledge base of the technical skills involved in school leadership, like management. These are areas that they do not see on a daily basis.

Educational Leadership Professors and Programs

Alabama professors should attempt to differentiate the design of their preparation programs for their students who aspire to be school district administrators as opposed to building level or vice versa. An action of this nature would take into account the experiences and skills that students bring to the program. Fordham University's National Principals Leadership Institute, which is exclusively designed for principals and assistant principals is an excellent example (Fordham, 1998). Professors in this state could design similar courses for superintendents or other central office personnel. These endeavors could be incorporated into degree programs or be offered for professional development.

Finally, educational leadership professors should intensify the role of field experiences in their programs. Several Alabama practitioners stated that they perceived the need to practice many of the theories and models presented in courses in a school or central office setting. Perhaps by incorporating more of these experiences across the coursework, administrators could be better prepared to deal with the technical responsibilities of their educational leadership positions (Milstein, 1994).

Conclusion

This exploratory study was only designed to assess perceptions about the importance of certain competencies or skill areas for public school administrators. It was designed to provide a general direction to stakeholders in Alabama's public schools. This study was unique because it allowed for the perceptions of four of the primary stakeholder groups in public education. In light of this, it is this researcher's view that the body of literature on skill areas for school leaders as well as preparation programs has been expanded by this research.

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